



## Sensemaking in the cross-cultural contexts of projects

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### Abstract

Projects are increasingly cross-cultural and complex, both technically and relationally. The diversity of participants enhances differences in perceptions and understanding of meaning of the variety of signals (such as drawings and messages); often, the consequence is reduced performance and conflictual situations. Appreciation of such differences and of how people make sense of their worlds enables participants to appreciate the views of others and so, mitigate potential problems. Hence, a review of sensemaking literature is undertaken regarding individual and collective sensemaking, cultural schemas and the impact of cultural sensemaking on cross-culture international alliances, together with examination of application to contexts of construction, such as project realisation process and construction innovation. Conclusions advocate practical changes to secure heedful sensemaking towards improving relationships on projects and both process and product performance.

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### 1. Introduction

A vital contribution to the domain of project management by Peter Morris is the stressing of the importance of the early stages of a (possible) project (e.g., Morris, 1989, 1998, 2011, 2013; Morris and Hough, 1987; Morris and Jamieson, 2004). During those stages ambiguities are greatest and are interpreted at individual and group levels so that decisions and actions are taken regarding both *product* and *process*. "...in the early stages of a project things are typically complex, intangible and uncertain [ambiguous and equivocal]...Front-end management entails work on a truly wide range of subjects...all of which need to be planned, risk-assessed and organised appropriately." ([ ] added; Morris, 2011: 6).

People construct meaning through *processes* that enable them to make sense of their world by interpretation of the

signals (cues) which they perceive. As it is at the front-end project stages that risks, uncertainties, ambiguity, and unknowns are greatest, project definition tends to be poor (Morris, 2011). Interpretations depend on the signals (objects, artefacts, messages, events, etc.), the processes of perception and interpretation, the situation (context), and the personality of the individual. Given that the world is rather disorderly, construction of meaning involves creation of rational order to secure closer coupling (Weick, 2001). In analysing the Channel Fixed Link, Winch (2013: 729) finds that "an important feature of future-perfect strategizing is the use of artefacts as representations of the future perfect state as part of 'designer culture'".

From any project investment perspective, *product* dominates *process* (Flanagan and Norman, 1983). Since the interaction (interdependence relationship) between process and product, especially the project in use, remains under-investigated and not well understood (Leiringer et al., 2009), much of Morris's (1998, 2013) work concerns the integration of projects into the broader, business context of project executions. The relationships for project executions form chains of agency which are

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amalgamated into networks. Understanding of self and of others in these networks is essential for effective delivery of *products* (projects) and (realisation) *processes* — in particular, concerning interactions (supported by practices and use of material artefacts) through human behaviour.

Research suggests that material artefacts and practices support cognitive work, as an individual's mental representation interacts with a material environment of resources. Examples of cognitive artefacts are drawings, to-do lists, computational devices etc. that facilitate various mental processes to process information (Clark, 2008). For instance, Morris (1998: 16) stated that “The contribution of IT .... through modelling, file sharing and effective communications contributes enormously to the effectiveness of team working”. However, the way in which these artefacts and practices enable individuals and groups to construct new understandings is largely missing from the literature of collective sensemaking (Stigliani and Ravasi, 2012) — an important consideration for the development and use of BIM.

Moreover, “The practice of project management is changing. New technologies and management practices are giving managers new means to improve performance” (Morris, 1998: 16). Thus, innovation in construction has been a popular topic in project management research and past studies have shown that innovation is inherently linked to leadership and strategy making — both of which require the underpinning mechanism of sensemaking, individually as well as collectively, by the innovation champion and the management board. While prospective models of sensemaking have been applied in research of strategy making (Gioia and Thomas, 1996) and innovation (e.g. Rafaeli et al., 2009) to investigate the construction of new understandings of an environment and how to relate to it, this area of future-oriented sensemaking remains undertheorised (Stigliani and Ravasi, 2012).

In particular, the understanding of the transition from individual to group-level prospective sensemaking is fundamental in realising how collective interpretations of new ideas are made and change instigated as a response to the stimuli posed by an ever challenging and complex environment, e.g. innovation in construction. “Understanding how individuals respond to uncertain situations, therefore, requires an understanding of how individuals intuitively assess the situation they perceive, before expressing a response” (Maytorena et al., 2007: 315).

Sensemaking is about connecting cues to interpret what is going on (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010) and cues are represented by cultural and social practices, through external images, material artefacts and verbal conversations (see Harris, 1994; Ravasi and Schultz, 2006). For instance, there is a range of cues (e.g. collective history, organisational symbols, consolidated practices) for (re)interpreting and (re)evaluating the defining attributes of an organisation through a retrospective rationalisation of the past (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006). As Weick (1985: 382–3) maintained that definitions of organisational culture “are retrospective, summarizing patterns in past decisions and actions”, they are “embodied in actions of judging, creating, justifying, affirming and sanctioning” and that these definitions provide “continuity, identity, and a

consistent way of ordering the world.” Therefore, culture can be seen as a sensemaking device that cues existing discursive practices to serve as organising principles through which actors enact reality (Long and Mills, 2010); in which case, sensemaking is limited to the extent that the label chosen for each metaphor cues the deeper assumptions, or rules, that give meaning to the word and hence shape the reality described by it (Long and Mills, 2010). Weick (2001: 340) also asserts that “Making meaning is an issue of culture”.

Hence, this paper focuses on the impacts of culture on sensemaking to discuss two aspects:

- (1) how culture (organisational, professional etc.) underpins collective sensemaking via schemas; and
- (2) implications of cultural sensemaking where cross-cultural issues – cultural ambiguity, interpretative schemas – affect sensemaking and sensegiving in managing construction projects.

## 2. Sensemaking

Individuals are continuously concerned with the question, “what is going on?” Hence, whether people are involved in social networks, organisational settings, or life in general, they are individually and interactively engaged in processes of sensemaking. “Sensemaking involves the ongoing, retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing” (Weick et al., 2005: 409). Thus, in academic terms, sensemaking is a process of social construction that occurs when discrepant cues interrupt individuals' ongoing activity, and involves the retrospective development of plausible meanings that rationalise what people are doing. “Central to the development of plausible meanings is the bracketing of cues from the environment, and the interpretation of those cues based on salient frames. Sensemaking is thus about connecting cues and frames to create an account of what is going on” (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010: 551).

However, sensemaking accounts take place within sociocultural contexts (O'Leary and Chia, 2007) to satisfy individuals' needs for achieving coherence, consistency and legitimacy in thoughts and actions. These mental connections have to be continuously enacted, reenacted, and modified by alternative experiences to proliferate interpretative schemas. O'Leary and Chia (2007) argue that equivocality is a basic condition of organisational life (an element of ontology), therefore selective censoring is a fundamental feature of the sensemaking process, i.e., an individual will actively select an aspect of experience and censor what s/he does not wish to attend to. Thus, Dunning and Bansal (1997) suggest that culture is an ‘informal institution’ that represents collective subjectivity, constrains behaviour, and structures political, economic and social interactions. “(T)he episteme of a culture organizes our sensorium ..... in such a way that we are made to attend to some types of stimuli rather than others by making an issue of certain ones while relatively neglecting other ones” (O'Leary and Chia, 2007: 395). Indeed, Morris (2013: 13) asserts that “...the effect of human behaviour

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